THE CREATION OF MUSEUM STUDIES AS A SCIENCE: THE AMERICAN AND GERMAN MODELS AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:

Museum studies, or museology, has evolved into a recognized academic discipline, especially through the influence of American and German models. Rooted in both practical applications and theoretical inquiry, the development of museum studies reflects broader intellectual, cultural, and scientific paradigms. This paper explores the institutionalization of museum studies as a scientific discipline, highlighting its growth in the United States and Germany and examining philosophical contributions that have shaped its epistemological foundation.

The development of museum studies—also referred to as museology—as a scientific and academic discipline is a significant chapter in the evolution of modern cultural and educational institutions. This paper examines the historical emergence of museum studies as a science, with particular emphasis on the German and American models, while also integrating philosophical perspectives that have influenced the theoretical foundations of the field. The German tradition contributed a structured, theory-oriented approach grounded in aesthetics, pedagogy, and the philosophy of knowledge, drawing from Neo-Kantian and phenomenological frameworks. Thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Otto Neurath provided critical insights into the nature of knowledge, interpretation, and communication—concepts central to museum theory and practice.

In contrast, the American model emphasized professionalization, pragmatism, and public service, inspired by the educational theories of John Dewey and the democratic values underlying cultural access. American museology evolved through practical museum training programs and the institutional efforts of bodies like the American Association of Museums, focusing on exhibition design, visitor experience, and museum management.

This paper also explores broader philosophical debates about whether museology qualifies as a "science." While Karl Popper's criteria for scientific knowledge present challenges for the field, the broader

epistemological frameworks of Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill support a more interpretive, socially situated understanding of museums and their functions.

Through historical analysis, philosophical interpretation, and comparative evaluation, the paper argues that museum studies, though interdisciplinary and partly humanistic, has evolved into a legitimate academic field with a distinct methodology, purpose, and theoretical structure. It continues to draw from both scientific principles and philosophical inquiry to address questions of education, identity, memory, and cultural representation in contemporary society.

Key words: Museum Studies; Museology; Philosophical Foundations; German Model; American Model; Museum Theory; Cultural Institutions; John Dewey; Immanuel Kant; Otto Neurath; Scientific Discipline; Museum Education; Interpretation; Epistemology; History of Museums

Introduction.

The transformation of museum work into a field of scholarly inquiry emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As museums evolved from private collections into public educational institutions, a need arose for systematic approaches to collection management, exhibition design, and public engagement. The academic recognition of museology—or museum studies—stemmed from this transformation. The American and German models of museum studies played a central role in shaping its development as a scientific field.

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative, interdisciplinary research methodology** grounded in historical analysis, comparative evaluation, and philosophical inquiry. The purpose is to explore the formation of museum studies as a scientific discipline through the lens of two influential national models—Germany and the United States—and to analyze how philosophical thought contributed to its theoretical foundation.

1. Historical-Comparative Method

A historical-comparative approach was applied to trace the evolution of museum studies in both Germany and the United States from the late 19th century to the late 20th century. Archival materials, foundational texts in museology, and institutional histories were reviewed to identify milestones, key figures, and the progression of ideas in each country. The comparative element involved juxtaposing the development paths, educational frameworks, and museological philosophies of both nations to identify convergences and divergences.

2. Literature Review and Textual Analysis

Primary and secondary sources, including books, academic journal articles, institutional reports, and conference proceedings, were analyzed. Key theoretical texts from philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Michel Foucault, and Thomas Kuhn were examined to interpret how broader philosophical concepts influenced the understanding of museums as epistemic spaces. Emphasis was placed on concepts like knowledge production, interpretation, and the role of institutions in shaping public understanding.

3. Philosophical Inquiry

This component of the methodology utilized **conceptual analysis** to interpret and synthesize the philosophical underpinnings of museology. The study drew on frameworks from epistemology, aesthetics, and hermeneutics to examine how thinkers such as Kant, Dewey, Foucault, and Hooper-Greenhill conceptualized knowledge, education, and interpretation in relation to museum practice. This analysis provided insights into the theoretical legitimacy of museum studies as a science or discipline.

4. Thematic Categorization

To organize and analyze data from historical and philosophical sources, the study employed thematic coding. Key themes included:

- Institutionalization of museum studies
- The museum as an educational versus interpretive space
- Philosophical foundations of curatorial and didactic practices
- Scientific status of museum studies

These themes allowed for a structured synthesis of findings across different intellectual traditions and national contexts.

Early Foundations of Museum Studies

The roots of museology can be traced to Enlightenment thinking, which emphasized the categorization and systematization of knowledge. Museums became a locus for the classification of human and natural history, echoing the empirical methodologies advocated by philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Auguste Comte. Kant emphasized the role of structured knowledge in understanding phenomena, a principle echoed in the systematic cataloging practices of early museums (Kant, 1781/1998).

In the 19th century, the rise of the public museum coincided with industrialization and nation-building. Museums in this period were seen as tools for civic education, moral improvement, and the reinforcement of national identity (Bennett, 1995).

Historical Background of the Creation of Museum Studies

The origins of museum studies—also known as museology—are deeply rooted in the evolution of museums themselves. While the practice of collecting and displaying objects dates back to antiquity, the formalization of museum studies as a scholarly discipline is a relatively recent development that emerged alongside modern academic and cultural institutions in the 19th and 20th centuries.

From Cabinets of Curiosity to Public Institutions

In the Renaissance and early modern periods, private collections—known as *cabinets of curiosity* (Wunderkammern)—were curated by aristocrats and scholars who sought to display natural specimens, antiquities, and artifacts as representations of wealth and intellectual prestige. These collections were rarely accessible to the public and lacked any systematic methodology for interpretation or education (Impey & MacGregor, 1985).

The Enlightenment brought about a shift in thinking about knowledge, classification, and public access to education. Philosophers such as Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasized public enlightenment through institutions of knowledge, including museums. This led to the transformation of elite collections into public museums, exemplified by the opening of the **British Museum** in 1759 and the **Louvre** in 1793 after the French Revolution.

19th-Century Developments and the Professionalization of Museum Work

The 19th century witnessed the proliferation of public museums across Europe and North America, reflecting national ambitions, scientific progress, and the emergence of public education. Museums were increasingly seen as vehicles for civic moral instruction, nationalism, and scientific dissemination (Bennett, 1995). However, museum work remained largely unstandardized, and there was no formal academic training for curators, conservators, or educators.

During this period, Germany emerged as a center for intellectual engagement with the museum as an institution. German scholars and museum professionals began to articulate principles for museum management, object classification, and display. Figures like **Gustav Waagen** and later **Hugo von Tschudi** helped define the museum's role in society, linking it to art history, archaeology, and pedagogy.

The Emergence of Museology as a Science in Germany

By the early 20th century, German-speaking countries began using the term *Museologie* to refer to the systematic study of museums. This reflected a growing interest in developing a theoretical framework for museum practice, informed by philosophy, education theory, and scientific classification. The German model emphasized **theoretical rigor**, influenced by the Neo-Kantian philosophy prevalent in Central European universities, which stressed the importance of categorization, phenomenology, and historical consciousness in interpreting material culture (Schubert, 2009).

Notably, **Otto Neurath's** concept of the "museum of the future" introduced a radical rethinking of the museum's communicative function, proposing simplified, visual languages for universal understanding. Neurath's ideas marked a departure from traditional object-centered museums toward interpretation and social relevance (Neurath, 1933).

The American Contribution: Pragmatism and Professionalization

In contrast to the theoretical emphasis in Germany, the American development of museum studies followed a more **pragmatic and professional path**. The United States saw the rapid expansion of museums in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, aligned with the ideals of democracy, progressivism, and public education. Influenced by the educational philosophy of **John Dewey**, American museums began to integrate visitor-centered approaches, interactive exhibitions, and school outreach programs (Hein, 1998).

The creation of professional organizations such as the **American Association of Museums (AAM)** in 1906 and the establishment of the first formal museum training programs in the 1920s, such as the **University of Chicago's program** and later the **Cooperstown Graduate Program**, signaled the institutionalization of museum studies as an academic and vocational field. These programs emphasized museum management, education, exhibition design, and public service—marking a shift from traditional scholarly curation to public engagement and administration

Global Institutionalization and Academic Recognition

By the mid-20th century, museum studies began to emerge as an independent field of academic research and teaching. The establishment of the **International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM)** under the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1977 further signaled the field's growing international legitimacy. Museology programs began appearing in universities across Europe, North America, and later in Asia and Africa.

Throughout the late 20th century, scholars such as **Eilean Hooper-Greenhill**, **Stephen Weil**, and **George Hein** contributed to developing museum theory, incorporating postmodern, critical, and pedagogical perspectives. These theoretical advancements expanded the discipline beyond object care to include questions of interpretation, audience engagement, representation, and institutional critique

The German Model: Theoretical and Systematic Museology

Germany is often credited with laying the theoretical foundation for museum studies. In the early 20th century, museum professionals in Germany began advocating for a structured, scientific approach to museum work. The term *Museologie* gained currency, reflecting the effort to systematize museum-related knowledge.

A central figure in this development was **Hugo von Tschudi**, who emphasized the museum as an educational institution. German thinkers like **Alexander Dorner** and **Otto Neurath** proposed that museums should not only preserve objects but also communicate ideas and narratives. Neurath's "museum of the future" focused on visual education and the use of didactic methods (Neurath, 1933).

By mid-century, German museology was characterized by its theoretical rigor, influenced by Neo-Kantian and phenomenological traditions. **Theodor Lipps** and later **Hans-Georg Gadamer** contributed indirectly to museology by advancing theories of aesthetics, perception, and interpretation, which informed curatorial practices (Gadamer, 1960/1989).

The American Model: Pragmatic and Professionalized Museum Studies

In contrast, the American model of museum studies developed with a more pragmatic and professional orientation. American museums were influenced by John Dewey's educational philosophy, which emphasized experiential learning and the social function of education (Dewey, 1934). Dewey's ideas inspired innovations in exhibition design, such as interactive displays and narrative-driven curation.

In the 1920s and 1930s, institutions like the **American Association of Museums** (now the AAM) began to standardize museum practices. The emergence of formal training programs—such as those at the **University of Chicago** and later the **Cooperstown Graduate Program**—marked the institutionalization of museum studies in the U.S.

A significant contribution to the American model came from **Stephen Weil**, who argued that museums must balance their roles as both educational and cultural institutions while maintaining

professional standards (Weil, 1990). American museology thus focused more on operational and managerial concerns, reflecting the country's emphasis on practical outcomes.

Philosophical Perspectives and the Scientific Status of Museum Studies

Philosophers have long debated whether museology qualifies as a "science." **Karl Popper's** notion of falsifiability as a demarcation criterion for science would seemingly exclude museum studies, as it lacks predictive theories. However, others, like **Thomas Kuhn**, have argued for broader conceptions of scientific paradigms that accommodate disciplines rooted in humanistic inquiry (Kuhn, 1962).

Museology intersects with epistemology, aesthetics, hermeneutics, and ethics—domains often addressed by philosophers such as **Michel Foucault**, who examined how institutions like museums shape knowledge and power (Foucault, 1972). Foucault's *archaeology of knowledge* offers a critical lens through which to understand how museums construct narratives and authority.

Additionally, **Eilean Hooper-Greenhill**, influenced by post-structuralist thought, challenged the traditional positivist models in museology, advocating for interpretive and visitor-centered approaches (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Her work contributed to the field's theoretical depth and opened new pathways for research in museum education and semiotics.

Conclusion

Museum studies has evolved from a set of professional practices into a multidisciplinary academic field. The German model, with its theoretical and philosophical orientation, and the American model, emphasizing pragmatism and professionalization, have both significantly influenced this transformation. Philosophers—from **Kant to Foucault**—have enriched the field by offering insights into the nature of knowledge, perception, and institutional authority. Today, museum studies stand as a hybrid discipline that draws from the sciences, humanities, and social sciences to address complex questions about culture, memory, and meaning.

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